

China announces first panda from frozen sperm

July 24 2009, By TINI TRAN , Associated Press Writer



In this photo released by the Xinhua news agency, a staff member feeds the newly born giant panda cub at Bifeng Gorge Base in Ya'an, southwest China's Sichuan province, on Wednesday July 22, 2009. Giant panda Na Na gave birth to twins on Wednesday when solar eclipse occurred in China, according to Xinhua. (AP Photo/Xinhua, Jiang Hongjing)

(AP) -- China announced the first successful birth of a panda cub from artificial insemination using frozen sperm, giving a new option for the famously infertile endangered species, officials said Friday.

Female panda You You (pronounced Yo Yo) gave birth to the new cub Thursday morning at the Wolong Giant Panda Research Center in southwestern Sichuan. It is You You's third baby, and the 10th panda cub born at Wolong this year.

Just after dawn, the pinkish, hairless cub emerged, and its mother licked the baby to clean it, according to footage shown by state broadcaster CCTV.

Panda researchers said Friday that they believe it's the first successful live birth worldwide using frozen panda sperm.

"We did try before but it failed," said Huang Yan, a deputy research technician with the China Panda Preservation Research Center.

The technique has been tried in other countries but this was the first known instance of a live birth, he said.

The sperm from male panda Lolo had been frozen for "a number of years," said Huang, though he did not give details.

[Artificial insemination](#) is commonly used for breeding [pandas](#), which have a very low sex drive. In 2006, 34 pandas were born through artificial insemination in China and 30 survived - both record numbers for the endangered species. The technique has also been used at zoos in the United States.

However, using panda sperm that has been frozen earlier - instead of from an immediate donor - had not been successful before.

Scientists carried out the artificial insemination in March, and You You was found to be pregnant in June during an ultrasound exam, according to a notice on the Wolong Center's Web site.

The technique, if it can be replicated, will be a positive boost for panda conservation efforts, said Matthew Durnin, regional science director in the Asia-Pacific and North [Asia](#) for The Nature Conservancy, a U.S.-based [conservation](#) organization.

"In the past, they're limited to using semen from a few virile, reproductive males. If you're using only one male at a time, you start to get lower and lower diversity. This can help with issues of genetic diversity among your captive population," he said.

Breeding giant pandas in captivity has proved difficult. Pandas are threatened by loss of habitat, poaching and a low reproduction rate. Females in the wild normally have a cub once every two or three years. The fertility of captive giant pandas is even lower, experts said.

Only about 1,600 pandas live in the wild, mostly in China's southwestern Sichuan province, which was hit by an earthquake last year that killed nearly 70,000 people. An additional 120 are in Chinese breeding facilities and zoos, and about 20 live in zoos outside China.

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